

On the Distinction between "Being-in-Itself" and "Meaning-for-Us"

1. Analysis discloses that "real" and its cognates are systematically ambiguous, in that, while it has a "field-invariant force," it has "field-dependent standards." This is not surprising, of course, because the same systematic ambiguity attends "true" and its cognates, with which "real" and its cognates are correlative. For this reason, then, one could say that the distinction between "being-in-itself" and "meaning-for-us" is misleading, insofar as it implies, or appears to imply, that "reality" is not thus systematically ambiguous, and hence field-dependent as well as field-invariant.
2. But this is in no way to say that there is not a difference within any given field between what is real and what is not. For if what is real, given some mode of reasoning, some way of taking account of things that we are in one way or another obliged to take account of, is, indeed, relative to this mode of reasoning, this way of taking account of things, it is not in the least relative to any particular conclusion arrived at within this mode of reasoning or way of taking account of things. In other words, there remains the distinction between what is believed to be true, given this mode of reasoning, and what is worthy of being believed true, given the standards established by this same mode of reasoning. In this sense, one could say that the distinction between "being-in-itself" and "meaning-for-us" is both pertinent and important, insofar as it expresses, or is taken to express, that what is worthy of being believed is one thing, what in fact is believed, something irreducibly different.
3. It would appear clear enough, then, that, however religious utterances represent a mode of reasoning, or a way of taking account of what we are somehow obliged to take account of, within that mode or way there is a distinction between what is worthy of being believed and what in fact is believed, and hence

sufficient reason to employ the distinction between "being-in-itself" and "meaning-for-us." It would appear to be no less clear that no religious utterance could be said to be true that did not speak about the reality it purports to be about not only in its meaning-for-us but also in its being-in-itself--not only as what we in fact believe, but also as what is worthy of our belief, whether we in fact believe it or not.

4. But this still leaves open the question of the mode of reasoning, or way of taking account of things that must somehow be taken account of within which religious utterances are either true or false. The answer to this question can be given only by rightly locating the religious mode of reasoning, or way of taking account of reality, relative to the metaphysical mode of reasoning, on the one hand, and the moral mode of reasoning, on the other. (I can't see my way clear to doing this rightly here. The essential point is that, while the religious mode of reasoning overlaps, and hence necessarily presupposes both the metaphysical and the moral modes, religious utterances nevertheless are neither properly metaphysical nor properly moral. This means, among other things, that religious utterances as such--as distinct from the metaphysical and moral assertions they necessarily imply--claim to be expressions of the authentic self-understanding whose possibility is implied both by a true metaphysics and a just morality. Thus, while they make or imply claims about self, others, and the whole, they do so only as authorizing--giving and demanding--the self-understanding that they also express. So far as the religious mode of reasoning as such is concerned, then, "God" in its proper theistic, as distinct from its broader, religious, meaning refers to the universal individual as authorizing a self-understanding of radical trust and radical loyalty. To affirm, accordingly, "I believe in God," is to affirm not only

that one in fact does believe in God but also that one in principle ought to believe in God even if one does not in fact do so, because God gives and demands just such faith. By comparison, then, with the way in which metaphysics takes account of God, one could say, quite understandably, religious utterances have to do with the meaning-of-God-for-us, not with the being-of-God-in-itself. But this would neither imply the illegitimacy in principle of metaphysical talk about God (on the ground that it mistakenly tries to overcome the systematic ambiguity of "real," etc.) nor collapse the crucial distinction between what is believed and what is worthy of belief. It would simply make clear the important difference between religion and metaphysics. And so, too, one could show, with the no less important difference between the religious mode of reasoning and the moral.

5. An analogy may be useful. The criteria appropriate for common sense talk about what is real allows one to say of the sun at sunset that it is "really red." To deny that such talk is about the real, on the ground that yet other criteria--those of the physicist, say--require one to say that the sun at sunset is "really yellow" is simply to shift the discussion to another mode of reasoning. What the religious mode of reasoning means by ultimate reality is what confronts us with the possibility of authentic self-understanding. To deny that the talk involved in the religious mode of reasoning is about the real, on the ground that yet other criteria--those of the metaphysician, say--require one to say that ultimate reality is the universal individual that is the ground and end of all other individuals and events, etc., is, again, simply to shift the discussion to another mode of reasoning.

6. The christological payoff of all this can be put very briefly. If the subject of the constitutive christological assertion is a constant, the predicate

is a variable that has had and can have any number of values. Whatever its values, however, the function of the variable is to affirm of the subject that it is the decisive revelation of God in the sense of explicitly authorizing the authentic self-understanding that God implicitly authorizes in and through all human experience. But this means, then, that christological utterances are a special class of utterances representing the religious mode of reasoning. As such, they intend to talk about the real in its being-in-itself as well as in its meaning-for-us, insofar as they express not only what in fact is believed concerning the subject of the christological assertion, but also what in principle ought to be believed, whether it in fact is believed or not. At the same time, they, too, are personal address, indirect if not direct, in that they are at one and the same time statements about Christ and about myself, about my own authentic possibility. By comparison with metaphysical statements, then, they can be said to be about the meaning-of-Christ-for-us, not about the being-of-Christ-in-himself.

1. On the one hand, to hold, as I do, that it is important to talk about the being of God in itself as well as the meaning of God for us may appear to deny that all talk about the being of God, as of the being of anything else, takes place in terms of some field(s) of discourse, established by some possible human question(s) and concern(s).--This, however, I have no intention of denying, because I entirely agree that meaningful talk about the being of anything is relative to some presupposed mode of reasoning; and I insist that one can agree with this without being a metaphysical neutralist.

2. On the other hand, to hold, as Bultmann does, that it is illegitimate to talk about the being of God in itself as well as the meaning of God for us may appear to deny that all talk about God, like any other talk purporting to express truth, presupposes the distinction between what is worthy of being believed and what in fact is believed.--This, however, Bultmann hardly has any intention of denying, because he entirely agrees that there is, indeed, a necessary distinction between what is true and what is believed with respect to God, etc.

3. Clearly, then, there need be no contradiction between our two positions.

1. Bultmann's thesis is correct that talk of God is strictly existential, in that it is always talk about the meaning of God for us.
2. But strictly existential talk has two aspects--metaphysical and moral. The first has to do with the necessary conditions of the possibility of our existence and of all existence; while the second has to do with the authentic possibility of our existence for acting responsibly in relation to all other existence. The essential point about existential talk is that these two aspects are mutually determining--our authentic possibility being the mode of existence appropriate to ultimate reality, and conversely (Geertz).
3. Because this is so, one can indeed say that theology must be able to speak of God in his being in himself as well as of God in his meaning for us. But, in saying this, one should be clear that one is not talking either about two different things or about two (abstract) aspects of one thing but about one of the two (abstract) aspects of one thing (namely, its metaphysical aspect) and this one thing itself (namely, existential talk about God).